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HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

OF THE

BARBERINI

OR

PORTLAND VASE,

BY

JAMES BOARDMAN.

"Or bid mortality rejoice or mourn
O'er the fine forms of Portland's mystic Urn."

DARWIN.

LIVERPOOL

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PRICE SIXPENCE.



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TO THE
PRESIDENT AND MEMBERS
OF THE
COMMITTEE
OF THE
LIVERPOOL ROYAL INSTITUTION
THIS

History and Description

OF THE
Barberini or Portland Vase,

OF WHICH
ITS GALLERY OF ART POSSESSES AN EXQUISITE COPY,
IS INSCRIBED.

Aigburth, April, 1855.

THE BARBERINI VASE.

This beautiful monument of ancient art—one of the most precious gems of antiquity, and one which has engaged the attention of the curious, and exercised the ingenuity of the greatest antiquaries in Europe—was discovered in the neighbourhood of Rome, in the Pontificate of Urban VIII (Barberini); hence the name, and, consequently, between the years 1623 and 1644, the former being the year of his advancement to the Papal chair, and the latter that of his death.

A mound of earth, called Monte del Grano, about three miles from the city, on the road to Frascati (Tusculum), at that time brought into cultivation, was perceived by the labourers digging to have a large vault under it, which, on being opened, was found to be a sepulchral chamber, enclosing a sarcophagus of excellent workmanship, and within this the vase in question, containing ashes.

The inscription on the sarcophagus shewed the sepulchral chamber to be the tomb of the Emperor Alexander Severus and his mother, Julia Mammæ. The sarcophagus was placed in the Museum of the Capitol, where it still remains. The

vase was deposited in the library of the Barberini family, and continued for above a century one of the most admired pieces of that celebrated collection, and was distinguished by the name of the Barberini Vase. After the dispersion of this library, the vase was purchased at Rome by Sir William Hamilton, to whom the nation is indebted for so many other fine remains of antiquity. By Sir William it was disposed of to the Duchess of Portland. At the sale of her Grace's curious and valuable museum, in the year 1786, the vase was purchased by the Duke of Portland for one thousand guineas, and from the zeal of its noble proprietor to promote the interest of the fine arts, Mr. Wedgwood was indulged with the opportunity of attempting to produce copies of it, his Grace having been pleased for that purpose to entrust the inestimable jewel into his hands upwards of twelve months.

It was subsequently deposited by its possessor, the Duke of Portland, in the British Museum, where it remained a great object of attraction until about ten years ago, when it was broken to pieces by a maniac visitor, and its restoration was considered to be impossible. After much ingenuity and labour, however, the restoration has been effected, and so completely, that, unless the vase is closely examined, the damage it sustained is hardly apparent. It is now placed in a part of the Museum appropriated to articles of great value and rarity, and can only be seen by permission of the keeper of the department in which it is deposited.

To state even the substance of what has been written upon this vase by different authors would far exceed the limits of a pamphlet. I shall, therefore, principally confine myself to giving the opinions of Mr. Wedgwood, which are considered by connoisseurs as rational and satisfactory.

The ground or body of the vase is a transparent blue glass, so deep in colour, that, when looked down upon, or viewed by reflection, it appears black and opaque. The raised figures are of a white glass, so far transparent, that the blue colour of the ground is seen through the thin parts of it,

while the thick parts have sufficient opacity to conceal entirely the colour of the ground, and appear of a pure white.

From a careful examination both of the ground and the bas-reliefs, and attention to some circumstances which did not seem previously to have been noticed, it appeared clearly to Mr. Wedgwood that the blue body of the vase, when formed, and while still red hot, was coated all over, as far as the bas-reliefs were intended to reach, with the white glass; and that the figures were afterwards produced in this coat by cutting it down to the blue ground in the manner of real cameos.

One circumstance in particular which favoured this idea was, that a stratum of the white glass is to be seen in a part where it cannot otherwise be accounted for, but where it necessarily would be left in this mode of formation. When the workman had formed the body of the vase with the white coat upon it, he had the handles to apply, which could be fixed only in the same red hot state. Now, in the upper part, where no bas-reliefs were intended, and of course no white coat laid on, they are united immediately to the blue ground; but the parts where the lower ends of the handles were to be fixed being previously covered with the white coat, (which in that red hot state he had no means of removing, or which he might not think it of consequence to remove) he applied them upon it, so that between the lower ends of the handles and the body of the vase there remains a stratum of white glass; and this being about the thickness of the most prominent parts of the white bas-reliefs, appears a strong presumption that it was originally a continuation of the same stratum. It cannot be supposed that this was done intentionally by way of ornament, for the artist has made no such use of it; as it now stands it is merely a white mass, and evidently a blemish, by detaching the blue handles from the blue body of the vase at one end, while they are united at the other end, as they ought to have been at both. In the delicate operation of cutting the bas-reliefs, the artist has

availed himself of an advantage which this mode of working, and this only, on his materials could have put into his hands.

To the exquisite beauty of the sculpture he has thus been enabled to superadd the effect of light and shade, by cutting down the parts to greater or less thinness, according as the shade was required to be deeper or lighter; that is, the blue underneath to be more or less visible through the semi-transparent white relief.

The gradations of shade, which give so much beauty and delicacy to the figures, were thus fully at his command: he could vary or deepen them at pleasure in any particular part by repeating the touches of his tool, seeing and examining his work at every stroke as he proceeded, till he had brought the whole to be exactly conformable to his own taste and wishes, and thereby producing a degree of thinness in some parts of the bas-reliefs utterly impossible to be obtained by any other means.

The like effect is observable in the antique cameos, which were executed in the same manner, and could not have been executed upon any other principle; but the expense of working in this manner a vase of such magnitude would necessarily be so great—so much time, labour and address would be required for its execution—that Mr. Wedgwood was of opinion that no modern artist, however capable, would undertake it.

Upon the subject represented on the vase, Mr. Wedgwood speaks as follows:—

“As cinerary urns were made and kept ready for sale, various in quality and price, like other works of art, it is plain that the figures upon them would not always relate to the fortunes of the particular persons whose remains might happen to be deposited in them; and it seems most probable that the elaborate urn in question, at the time of its being consigned to the sepulchre where it was found, was selected for that use, either from some such public repository, or from the cabinet of some friend; for it cannot be supposed that a

work, which would necessarily require many years for its execution, would have been undertaken, after a person's death, for the purpose of receiving his ashes from the funeral pile. The figures on these urns, however, would, for the most part, have some allusion to death, or the state of existence after it, agreeably to the theology of the times; and as they could not relate to the private history of the individual whose ashes they eventually accompanied, they would generally be, as indeed we find they are, in the sepulchral remains of antiquity, either of an emblematic nature, or exhibitions of religious rites, or historical representations of the death and exploits of some of the heroes of earlier ages.

“At this distance of time, when customs, manners and religions are almost wholly changed, and when many usages and events, probably often alluded to in these representations, are no longer known, we must expect much uncertainty in the explication of them; but where the intention of the artist appears sufficiently characterised in any of the principal figures, this will often lead us to develop, with greater probability, the meaning of the more subordinate parts.

“The figures on this vase I conceive to be of the emblematic kind. An inverted torch being a common symbol of extinguished life, the female figure, with that symbol in her hand, in a dejected and sorrowful attitude, may naturally be considered, especially on a sepulchral urn, as an emblem of death; and from her situation between the other two, she may be deemed the principal figure in this group.

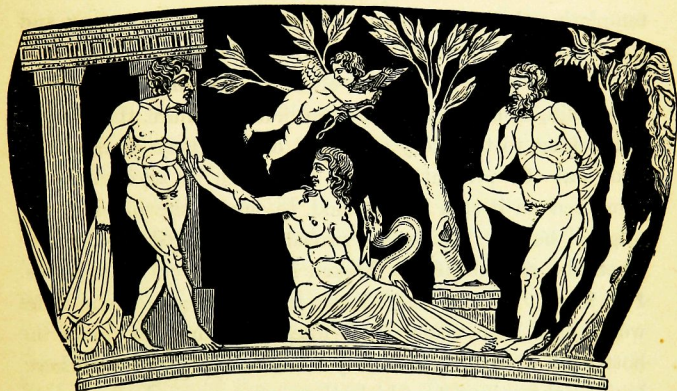
“The column behind the man, with its capital thrown down at the feet of this emblem of death, may denote that the person deceased was the head of a great family, or of an empire, a column being a common emblem both of one and the other; nor could so precious and costly an urn have been either intended for, or purchased by, any but personages of the first rank. The sceptre, in the left hand of the other female figure, may be an emblem of the authority of the

deceased, and his justice in his official character; or it may represent the family or province of which he was the head, or the deity who was their peculiar protector; and it only shewed the judgment and good sense of the artist, to leave some of the figures thus open to a latitude of interpretation, that they might be applicable to a greater diversity of characters and situations in life, still preserving the general signification of the whole.

“As emblematic and real personages are often seen in one and the same group in the works of the ancients, it is possible that the male figure, looking back anxiously at the female, as she does at him, may have been intended for the deceased person himself. The first group, therefore, would represent the solemn scene of death separating a great man from his family or his empire. And when we consider that it was a principle among the ancient artists, in order to produce that sublimity and greatness of style which we admire at this day, to employ no more action or expression in their design than was absolutely necessary for telling the story, the countenances and attitudes of the two figures will appear, perhaps, sufficiently expressive of the passions of the mind that would naturally arise on such an occasion.

“The other side of the vase appears to be a separate picture, in continuation of the same subject, and flattering to the memory of the deceased, representing his entrance, under the figure of a young man, into elysium. A gate or portico, it is well known, has been used from remote antiquity, both in language and the works of design, to signify the passage from the present state of our existence to the future; and the designer has here, with much address, represented, by the caution and timidity with which the new guest takes his first step out of this portal, that he feels himself on his passage into unknown regions: his holding fast his garments or clothing to the last moment, may beautifully denote the reluctance with which he puts off his corporeal substance.

“As the middle figure in the first compartment of the vase



was deemed principal, and an emblem of death, so the middle figure in this may be presumed, from her situation, from the office she is employed in, and from her holding a serpent, the well known symbol of immortality, to be principal likewise in this group, and to be an emblem of immortal life. She takes the shade tenderly by the arm, and encourages him, by her look, as well as her action, to come forward; while Love, or a genius looking back at him, with a countenance full of complacency, and a lighted torch in his hand (not inverted as in the preceding group), directs him on his way; and Pluto, the sovereign of all the infernal mansions, and the last figure in the group, appears ready to receive him, in an attitude and with an aspect which shews him to be contemplating the stranger, on his approach, with an earnest and (for Pluto) a benign attention.

“The figure on the bottom of the vase I shall not attempt to explain, being persuaded, as several others are, that it does not belong to the story expressed on the body of the vase, and that the present bottom is a piece of another work, cemented on it at a later period, to supply the place of the original bottom, which was probably destroyed at the time when the vase itself was broken into three or more pieces. For, first, it does not seem likely that any ornaments in relief would have been made, by so intelligent an artist, upon the bottom of a vessel, where they could not be seen, and where, besides the injury to which they were exposed themselves, they must be accompanied with the manifest inconvenience of preventing the vessel from standing firm. Secondly, this bottom has evidently been cut and ground, to bring it to a proper size and shape for its present situation; and in doing this, not only the foliage, but the drapery and body of the figure itself, have been likewise cut, I may say mangled, (part of the elbow being taken away,) in such a manner as no piece would have been that was originally intended for so beautiful and expensive a work. Thirdly, the bas-reliefs themselves have all the appearance of being part of another work, where

the figure and appendages were upon a much larger scale than those on this urn; the style in which the figure is designed, the character of the drapery and the execution are likewise very different. For these reasons I cannot look upon the present bottom as a part of such a whole.

“With regard to the piles of stones which most of the figures rest upon, if those in the first compartment were intended, as some imagine they were, to represent sarcophagi, they would coincide with my explication, and perhaps give some additional weight to it. But flattering as this illusion might be, I fear it must be given up; for in the works of the ancients we meet so frequently with figures, as well divine as human, sitting upon piles of stones, in such a variety of characters, scenes and circumstances, melancholy and gay, military, civil, pastoral, bacchanalian, &c. that it is probable the artist was guided more by his own taste, or that of the age he lived in, than by any immediate relation which these seats bore to the subject (whatever it might be) that he meant to represent.

“The mask heads at the bottoms of the handles, and the trees interspersed among the figures in both groups, I considered in the same light as the like subordinate embellishments on other cinerary urns, such as baskets of flowers, plants, shells, festoons, borders enriched with foliage, &c. All these objects, independently of what they may contribute to the decoration of the piece, or the dignity and solemnity of the scene, may have had their peculiar allusions, especially when placed on a sacred or sepulchral urn, and accompanying emblematic representations of death and immortality.

“But the religious usages and mythology of those early ages, and the symbols thence derived, appear in many respects so intricate and obscure, that I despair of being able to say anything satisfactory on these inferior decorations, and therefore decline the task altogether.”

With respect to the exquisite copy of the vase in the gallery

of the Royal Institution,* a chef d'œuvre in the ceramic art, I have only to observe that it was modelled by that classic artist, Flaxman; and was the last made under the personal inspection of that truly great man, the contemporary of Watt and Arkwright—WEDGWOOD.

The death of Mr. Wedgwood took place in the year 1795, and was the prelude to a gradual decay in the peculiar branch of art in which this copy of the Portland Vase may be classed, and the subsequent deaths of the artists whom he had trained and directed have rendered the production of a similar work at the present time impossible. Should, however, the energies of our manufacturers be directed to the subject, stimulated as they now are by national exhibitions and royal patronage, despite of our still lamentable lack of taste, we need not despair of our recovering our lost ground.

“The progress of the arts,” said Mr. Wedgwood, when speaking in reference to his labours in the production of this vase and other fine works on which he was engaged, “depends much upon the encouragement which they receive from those who, by their rank or affluence, may be termed legislators in taste, and who alone are capable of bestowing rewards upon the labours of industry and the exertions of genius. It is their influence that forms the character of every age; they can turn the current of human pursuits at their pleasure, and be surrounded either with beauty or deformity, with men or barbarians. Great improvements cannot be made without powerful patronage: no art can be raised to great perfection with feeble efforts, or at a small expense; and it depends upon the views and liberality of those who are possessed of riches or power, whether individuals shall be ruined or rewarded for their ingenuity or exertions. Those who duly consider the influence of the fine arts on the human mind, will not think it a small benefit to the world to diffuse their productions as wide and preserve them as long as possible. The multiplying the copies of fine works in beautiful and

* Presented to the Royal Institution by the author.

durable materials must obviously have the same effect in respect to the arts as the invention of printing has upon literature and the sciences. Whatever awakens and keeps alive the attention of the public to the productions of the arts, and nothing can be more effectual for that purpose than the diffusion of copies of fine works, must ultimately be advantageous to the artist who is capable of producing fine originals; for this general attention, in whatever country it is sufficiently excited, will always produce amateurs, who, not contented with copies, will be ambitious of possessing fine originals, from which copies may be multiplied and diffused, to the credit of the possessor, and the emolument, as well as the credit of the original artist. Nothing can contribute more effectually to diffuse a good taste through the arts than the power of multiplying copies of fine originals, by which means the public eye is instructed and the arts receive improvement; nor can there be any surer way of rendering an exquisite piece possessed by an individual famous without diminishing the value of the original; for the more copies there are of any work the more celebrated the original will be, and the more honour derived to the possessor. Every body wishes to see the original of a beautiful copy. That beautiful forms or compositions never will or can be made in a little time, or at small expense, is so well known that it is almost unnecessary to dwell upon the subject. It is obvious that all works must bear a price in proportion to the skill, the time, the expense, and the risk attending the invention and execution of them. Subjects which, for these reasons, bear a high price, and are therefore by many called dear, are, when justly estimated, the cheapest, and attended with less profit to the maker than those which are called cheap. A competition for cheapness, rather than for excellence, a desire of selling much in a little time, without a due regard to the taste and quality of the production, is a most frequent and certain cause of rapid decay, both to the fine arts and to manufactures. If purchasers should at any

time, under the fallacious appearance of saving, prefer mediocrity, it would then be impossible for artists or manufacturers to pay the necessary attention to excellence, and consequently to keep up, much less to improve, the quality of their works." "Finally," says this great founder of a manufacture now affording employment to nearly a hundred thousand souls, "IT IS BETTER TO GIVE UP THE MAKING OF ANY PARTICULAR ARTICLE THAN SUFFER IT TO BE DEGRADED."

Opinion of Sir JOSHUA REYNOLDS on Mr. WEDGWOOD's copy of the Portland Vase, delivered to the Royal Academy:—

"I have compared the copy of the Portland Vase by Mr. Wedgwood with the original, and I can venture to declare it to be a correct and faithful imitation, both in regard to the general effect, and the most minute detail of the parts.

J. REYNOLDS.

LEICESTER FIELDS, 15th *June*, 1790."



GEO. SMITH, WATTS AND CO. PRINTERS.